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ABSTRACT

The attitudes of 100 Alabama legislators toward higher education and about major issues facing higher education in the State were investigated. Surveys were returned by 79 house members (75 percent) and 21 senate members (60 percent). Attention was focused on legislators' views of the mission of higher education, how higher education should be defined and funded, the role of athletics, who should control higher education, criteria for admitting students, the role junior colleges should play, and how accountability should be measured. Also considered was the relationship of legislators' attitudes to background data (i.e., legislator's experience, education, race, age, size of home town, geographic location, party affiliation, profession, and liberal or conservative philosophical base). Findings lead to the following conclusions: there is little agreement among legislators as to how higher education should be funded; legislators have a favorable perception of higher education in Alabama; there is no agreement on an effective method to reduce duplication in higher education; legislators feel that higher education is their responsibility; and legislators desire a greater degree of accountability for higher education. (SW)

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Attitudes of Alabama Legislators Toward Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to determine the attitudes of Alabama legislators toward higher education and, in particular, to investigate their attitudes toward major issues facing higher education in Alabama. The study sought to discern what the legislators saw as the mission of higher education, how they felt higher education should be defined and funded, what should be the role of athletics, who should control higher education and through what kind of agency or board, what criteria should be used in admitting students, what role should the junior colleges play, and how and by whom accountability should be measured.

In addition to an investigation of the legislators' attitudes toward topical areas, the study also sought to correlate their attitudes with demographic data such as the legislators' experience, education, race, age, size of home town, geographic location, party affiliation, profession, and philosophical base--whether liberal or conservative.

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METHODOLOGY

The group surveyed was the Alabama legislature meeting the summer of 1983. All members were asked to respond. This included the 105 members of the house and the 35 members of the senate. Each legislator was sent a letter from a fellow legislator in his or her respective chamber encouraging participation in the study.

The survey was administered to the study participants via their mail boxes at the Capitol. After another follow-up, a total of 79 house members (75%) and 21 senate members (60%) returned the survey.

The survey instrument consisted of 51 items divided into topical areas as listed below:

Topical Area	Items
Mission	1- 2
Political Involvement of Employees	3- 4
Purpose	5
Coordination and Control	6-14
Duplication of Programs	15-17
Financing Private Higher Education	18-20
Financing Public Higher Education	21-25
Unified Budgeting	26-28
Research Institutions	29-31
Athletics	32-33
General Information	34
Competency-Based Education	35-37
Tenure	38
Admission Standards	39-42
Respondent Data	43-51

Items 1-42 of the survey instrument were designed for the purpose of identifying the legislators' attitudes on a number of important topics which dealt with a cross section of issues currently facing decisionmakers in higher education.

Three different analyses were performed on the data gathered from the survey. The data gathered from the survey were first analyzed by counting the number of responses to each choice on every item maintaining separate counts for the house and senate surveys. Because of the differences of each item, careful examination of responses was necessary and, therefore, required that each item be considered as an independent line of inquiry. Response rates were computed for items 1-42 to determine what percentage of those responding held a like or similar opinion. The information obtained was considered further in discussing the recommendations and conclusions of the study. These data were central to the primary purpose of the study, since the answers obtained to items 1-42 provided basic information as to how the legislators perceived the information on topical areas regarding the educational realm.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the findings of this study indicated that a slight majority of the legislators agreed that the individual should bear the greatest portion of the cost of a college education. It is interesting to note that even though this question was prefaced with the statement that both the individual and society benefit from a college education, the legislators still felt the individual should be responsible for the cost.

Legislators expressed mixed feelings about whether or not education should be constitutionally charged as an

essential function of state government.

Sixty-two percent of the senators indicated in the study that lobbyists should not be paid by state funds. This item referred to the appropriateness of persons such as college presidents and other employees of colleges and universities whose salaries are paid from state funds being allowed to travel to Montgomery and lobby legislators for more funds for their institutions. Approximately 50% of the house members agreed with 62% of the senators that this should not be allowed.

Of the 100 legislators who participated in this study, 14 house members indicated they were employed in education. No senator listed education as an occupation. Since the legislative directory indicates there is one senator employed in education, it can be assumed this person did not answer the survey. Of all those responding whether individuals who were paid by state funds should be allowed to serve in the legislature, 63% of the senators and 66% of the house members said they should be allowed to serve in the legislature if employed by the state.

The study respondents felt strongly that the purpose of a college education should be to provide the skills necessary to earn a living. This study also found that the majority of the legislators felt the legislature should take responsibility for creating a centralized coordinating agency as well as funding such an agency.

In regard to long-range planning, the study revealed that legislators were divided as to who should be responsible for performing the study, analysis, and planning of higher education in Alabama. Thirty-eight percent of the senators and 46% of the house members felt the planning agency should be newly created centralized coordinating agency while approximately 38% of the two groups said the planning agency already in existence, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, should carry on this responsibility.

Seventy-five percent of the senators and 64% of the house members felt a separate coordinating board should be set aside for the two-year institution now governed by the State Baord of Education whom they felt had made some or little progress with two-year schools. The results of this study showed that the legislators responding to the item regarding whether or not more medical schools should be established agreed with the Commission's recommendations. This study found that 80% of both chambers of the legislature felt no new medical programs should be established.

In response to reducing duplication of programs of higher education in Alabama, the study found that a majority of legislators favored combining programs and closing institutions where cost effectiveness dictated. Only 38% of the senators and 20% of the house members felt the Alabama Commission on Higher Education should have authority to do such consolidating. Legislators were not in favor of the idea of the legislature taking the responsibility of the decisions regarding closings either. Consequently, the study

showed that no consensus was gained as to who should make these decisions.

The legislators agreed that formula funding could provide a means by which they could evaluate an institution's needs and make an appropriation. They also agreed that the university administrator could be given some latitude in regard to the funding after it was received by the institution.

Eighty-five percent of the senators and 90% of the house members felt Alabama could afford a major research university. Approximately 50% of the legislators felt a tax should be raised to provide funding of such a university if needed.

The survey results indicated that the legislators viewed the quality of higher education in Alabama as academically average compared to the other state supported institutions in the south. The 1984 Unified Budget Recommendations of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education stated that in order to be able to continue to compete with other institutions in the south, the institution must be adequately funded and develop proposals to prevent competition and overlap of programs such as engineering/technical and medical/health related and teacher education programs.

The study revealed that 52% of the senators and 41% of the house members said tenure was not essential to quality education. The legislators stated overwhelmingly that limits should be placed on out-of-state students.

The information obtained from this study indicated that

Alabama legislators do not generally have different opinions of higher education simply because of the chamber in which they serve. Four items were found to vary significantly when the data was analyzed of house versus senate differences. Since only four items were found to be statistically significant, it is clear that the two divisions basically hold similar opinions.

The study did reveal, however, several differences due to demographic variables. Race provided the greatest number of differences. The study revealed that race was most often a factor in questions dealing with accountability and competency. Black legislators most often favored practices allowing the individual institutions to operate without a great deal of influence from the state level in the evaluation of programs and student accountability. White legislators favored closing institutions and programs not meeting state-set competency standards.

The area of coordination and control of higher education brought about the greatest difference among the demographic data. Experience, race, and size of home town were found to be significant issues when considering who should coordinate institutions of higher education. More experienced, black and rural legislators all agreed that coordination of institutions should be centralized.

Conclusions

Findings of this study appear to justify the following conclusions:

1. There is little agreement among legislators as to how higher education should be funded.

2. Legislators have a favorable perception of higher education in Alabama.

3. There is substantial agreement among legislators that too much duplication exists in higher education in the states.

4. There is no agreement on effective means to reduce duplication in higher education in the state.

5. Legislators feel that higher education is their responsibility.

6. Legislators desire a greater degree of accountability for higher education.

Summary

The most significant findings indicated that legislators felt they should be responsible for the funding and the accountability of institutions of higher education. They also felt a new centralized coordinating agency should be established to coordinate both two and four-year institutions of higher education. Further, Alabama legislators expressed a need for greater quality and competence on the part of institutions of higher learning in the state.

Generally, however, the study found legislators to have favorable opinions regarding higher education in Alabama. They perceived the quality of state institutions to be of average to above average quality when compared to institutions throughout the south. The respondents showed interest in policies regarding higher education and a desire to be involved in the selection of institutional boards of trustees as well as the governance structure of the system as a whole.

The findings regarding comparison of topical areas versus demographic data revealed only a few items where demographics made a statistically significant difference. The factor of race provided the greatest number of statistically significant items.

Finally, results of the comparison of house versus senate response provided only four items of significance. This indicated that there was little significant difference in the legislators' opinions because they served in the senate or house chambers.